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Survey of Student Perceptions of Changes Between English Teaching in High School and in College in Large Classrooms in Japan

Torkil Christensen

Abstract

This is a report of student perceptions of differences between English study in high school and college in Japan. The survey showed that students are not concerned about class size, but express fairly consistent opinions about the curriculum. They are concerned about obtainig useful English skills. They do not feel that such are obtained in high school but that college English provides more of the kind of English they wish to study.

Introduction

The problems of large classes are of great concern to instructors, and teachers opinions and impressions of this special kind of teaching environment are the basis for a teacher's approach to dealing with this kind of situation. In a survey of English teaching at the college level (Koike, 1983) teachers found the class size to affect their effectiveness as instructors, with the size of classes common in Japan being rated as less than optimum. Suggestions beyond reducing student numbers per class are not generally made however, and the pressure from considerations extraneous to teaching seen to preclude changes in the existing arrangements. As a result there is a conflict between instructors having to teach classes they think are too large and unwieldy and an absence of real ex-

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pectations that the situation will be alleviated.

Under such circumstances it may then be asked how the students are coping with a situation that is considered unfortunate by their instructors. However, the large number of students in a class makes it quite difficult to get a representative idea of what the students think. As a result the needs and perceptions of students in large classes are often simply assumed without consultations with the students, based on what a particular instructor feels or wishes to impute on a particular teaching enviroment.

The present survey then sets out to explore aspects of student perceptions of their learning environment, specifically as it relates to the changes that take place from the study in high school to college.

The idea for this survey came about after talking with a number of teachers of large classes, it was felt that there was very little agreement on what the students in a large class wanted, how they perceived their environment, and what their goals were. Due to the large number of students it is moreover difficult to get a representative idea of these matters by talking to the students.

The survey may then be seen as a step towards elucidating some of the attitudes held by these students. The survey considers the students' perceptions of the changes that have occurred in the English teaching they have been subjected to, specifically the changes from high school to college.

The survey is of Japanese students and all the participating students were full time students studying in Sapporo, Japan. The survery was administered in the third week of the second semester of the students' first year of college, to ensure that the memory of the experience in high school was still fresh and that the students were well enough acquainted with college to be able to evaluate what goes on there.

The Survey

The survey was administered to nine different classes in the third week of the second semester of the first year of college of the students. Prior to entering college the students had all had six years of English in junior high and high schools, and with a few exceptions this study had all been in large classes. The small number who had experienced smaller classes prior to college were students who had received more intensive English instruction in high school, such students were found only in the A and B groups (see below). In addition an undetermined proportion had spent one or more years after graduating from high school preparing for the college entrance examination. This proportion was the largest, about one third, in the E group, and probably well below 20% in the other groups.

The nine classes may be divided into five groups.

A: 47 junior college English majors who are studying English intensively, and where 'oral English' is studied in small classes—two classes of 23 and 24.

These students were enrolled in an English course and it may be expected that they had quite high expectations of the progress that their English proficiency would undergo as a result of the course. The English subjects that this group studies comprise over two thirds of all their classes. The students had often selected this particular course because of its reputed large element of 'real' English in contrast to the grammar translation that most have been offered in high school.

B: 73 junior college non-English majors who now study English once a week in small classes—three classes of 23, 24, and 26.

The B students are in a two year life sciences course where English is one of the foreign languages offered as part of the general education courses. About 80% of the students have selected

English as 'their' foreign language and this is the first time for most to be in classes of this size. Less than a quarter of the students chose English in the second year.

C: 29 college non-English majors who study English two or three times a week in large classes.

These students have all had English as one of the entrance examination subjects but have otherwise had minimum contact with English, and a large proportion have had little success in English. The study this year is very nearly the last required English study they will take part in (after this first year of college there is only one required class left in the second year). College English is at least initially viewed as a very difficult and even treacherous subject by many of these students, and their expectations for the study are largely limited to obtaining a passing grade.

D: 68 junior college English majors who study English somewhat intensively in large classes (English subjects less than half of the total).

The students are English majors but the study offered these students is somewhat less intensive than that of the A students and only in a few cases do the students get to study in small classes. Only few are very ambitious about the level of English they want to reach and the majority go to quite some lengths not to get too involved with the study.

E: 99 students of a medical college who study English with about the same intensity as in high school (about one lesson a day) and in large classe－two classes of 49 and 50.

These students are expected to be able to use English on graduation five and a half years hence, and so are strongly motivated to study and learn. The English component of the entrance examination is very important for these students, and they all have a good grasp of grammar translation. Still, English is not the main reason for their study and this influences their attitude

towards the study.

Large classes here means classes of 40 or more students. In junior high and high schools the class size is generally 45-50, while in college it is similar but may reach 60 or more (the D students). The small classes are about half the size of large classes, not more than 25 students to a class.

An attempt was made to have roughly equal numbers of students in each group, about 50. The deviations arise from the survey being administered to three sections insted of two for the B students. For the C students there were rather more absences than expected on the day of the survey administration, and for the E students the survey was administered to two sections instead of the expected one. The A group consists of two classes (24 and 23 students).

The administration was done by the regular teacher (not the writer) and the surveys and responses were in Japanese. A copy of the original survey from with instructions is in the appendix.

The instructions for the survey were:

The following questions ask about differences between your English study in high school and college. Please answer as completely as possible, if there is not sufficient space please use the back of the paper or a separate sheet. Thank you for your cooperation.

The survey questions were:

1. How is the study of English in high school and college different?
2. What did not change in the English study in high school and college?
3. What are the strong points in high school English teaching?
4. What are the strong points in college English teaching?
5. What are the weak points in high school English teaching?
6. What are the weak points in college English teaching?
7. What do you wish to achieve with your English Study?

8. How should your study change for you to become able to achieve your goals?

The Responses

The following will detail the responses question by question. Percentages are used throughout and comments are added where responses for different classes and groups differ.

Question 1: How is the study of English in high school and college different?

The most frequently mentioned item was grammar versus useful or real English. 40-70% of all groups except the Cs. Only 17% of the Cs mentioned this, a reflection of their college experience, where the study is very similar to the way they studied in high school (but see question 2 below).

Students seemed to have a negative impression of their experience in high school. High school English was seen as passive, teacher centered, boring, one even called it a loss. College English was noted to be interesting, have more variety, and require self motivated study.

Other items were concerned with differences in the curriculum, that in high school being limited with the college curriculum having more different subjects and access to better facilities. The presence of non-Japanese instructors in college was noted by all groups as a positive aspect of the study (the students surveyed had all been subjected to non-Japanese instructors in college).

Only three students (2 As and 1 D) mentioned class size specifically, with the smaller college classes evaluated as superior.

Q2 What did not change in the English study in high school and college?

Most commonly mentioned was the material studied (Cs 28%, Es 20% and the other groups around 40%), and next the continued presence of specific subjects: grammar for the As (28%), reading and translation for the Cs (28%), Ds (21%), and Es (51%). The Bs did not mention subjects taught both in high school and college.

In college the Es material is quite different, containing specialized readings (medicine) and oral work, and this may explain the relatively low proportion mentioning change in the materials studied (both the E classes were very similar here). For the Cs there does not appear to be great differences but the proportion mentioning this was still low here. The Bs failure to mention specific subjects may be due to the college study being centered on oral English with the textbook entirely in English, very different from their high school experience.

The method of the study was found to be similar by a sizable number of students: 9% of As, 15% Bs, 12% Cs, 17% Ds, and 16 % of the Es. Passivity, the students not being active and not being encouraged to be active, was noted by 6 % of all the students.

The response 'nothing' was made by 9% of the As, 28% of Bs, 13% Cs, 3% Ds, and 8% Es. About 10% of the As, Bs, and Es left this question blank.

Class size was mentioned by 4% of the C students 3% of Ds, and 3% of the Es.

Q3 What are the strong points in high school English teaching?

Specific aspects of the high school study received the most frequent mention. Grammar (As 51%, Bs 25%, Cs 14%, Ds 24%,

and Es 33%), vocabulary (23, 25, 7, 24, 22%), and reading (9, 5, 10, 4, 18%). The help in getting them into college was mentioned by quite a few students (4, 21, 3, 6, 6%).

The responses here seem to show a good appreciation of what went on in high school English study and perhaps also what has shown to be of benefit after entering college.

Less frequently mentioned was the comprehensive 'study of the basics' (11, 8, 7, 7, 8%), friendly teaching (the teacher seen as accessible) was also mentioned (2, 1, 10, 16, 0%).

In addition to generally positive attitudes some students put down 'nothing' (4, 7, 21, 9, 8%), or left this question blank (2, 3, 14, 15, 7%), somewhat different numbers than those for 'nothing' and blank in question 2.

Q4 What are the strong points in college English teaching?

Conversation received the most frequent mention (21, 40, 7, 46, 14%). The incidence for the C and E students is low, as they do not have special classes in learning the spoken language.

Next highest were qualitative concerns of the students, 'real' English (34, 11, 21, 74%), and the study being seen as pratical (19, 20, 10, 7, 21%). Here only the D students appear low, perhaps, because of their nearly exclusive study in large slasses.

The presence of non-Japanese teachers was seen as a positive aspect by quite a number of students (15, 5, 14, 21, 4%). The stress on specific skills in college was highly estimated by some of the groups: Listening, something that is little practiced in high school (6, 4, 7, 4, 27%); pronunciation (0, 19, 3, 1, 3%); and reading (0, 0, 0, 3, 12%).

Generally it could be said that the responses show that the students are well aware of the different approach to English that is taken in college, at least for some of the groups, and that the

changed approach is well received.

Q5 What are the weak points in high school English teaching?

Grammar was most frequently mentioned (26, 36, 10, 29, 16 %), and students often expressed a concern that the grammar they were taught in high school was not contemporary (presently useful).

The little attention to the spoken language was seen as a weak point (21, 15, 7, 29, 20%), as was the heavy stress on preparing for the college entrance examinations (19, 24, 17, 13, 25%).

Many found the high school study 'not useful' (8, 15, 17, 12, 8%), somewhat balanced by those that mentioned 'nothing' as weak points (2, 3, 24, 11, 4%).

The size of the classes was found to be a problem by 3% of the Bs and 1% of the Ds.

This rather negative evaluation of high school English contrasts with the far more positive impression that the students express of their college experience. A major deficiency in high school appears to be the lack of attention to the spoken language, a result that shows in nearly all surveys of what students would like to study and what they see as important in English studies.

Q6 What are the weak points in college English teaching?

Here 'nothing' was mentioned most frequently (32, 48, 24, 19, 13%). A fairly even proportion of all groups left this question blank (13, 13, 14, 16, 15%).

Problems with the conduct of the lessons was also mentioned (0, 17, 21, 7, 7%), and there were a number of students that had other complaints, little grammar (11, 1, 3, 3, 0%), and the distance between students and teachers (9, 5, 3, 6, 0%).

In their responses to Q5 and Q6 the students show a keen awareness of the very large differences there are between the study in high school and college. The mention of specific matters for the high school question and the very large proportion being satisfied with the college question (question 6) also shows that 'not all is well in college,' and that there are elements that students still find reason to wish improvements in.

Q7 What do you wish to achieve with you English study?

Most wanted to learn 'conversation,' to speak English (13, 38, 38, 26, 18%). The lowest proportion here is for the A students possibly a reflection of their studying enough of that for the time being (four 45 min periods a week).

Next were responses which recognized that there is a wider world where English could be used. Speaking to non-Japanese, or 'foreigners' as the students termed them (11, 25, 17, 12, 27%), going abroad (17, 15, 21, 24, 15%), and getting to know non-Japanese (26, 6, 7, 9, 6%).

Closer to home some wanted to watch movies and videos without relying on subtitles (6, 2, 3, 6, 4%) or use English in jobs and similar (15, 5, 3, 12, 0%). The zero for E students here is balanced by 12% who wanted to use English professionally for scientific (medical) purposes.

Q8 How should your study change for you to become able to achieve your goals?

The most common response to this question was to leave it blank (4, 11, 21, 26, 20%).

Using English and studying hard (6, 23, 3, 25, 3%), improving conversational skills or doing more conversation (13, 10, 7, 13, 18

%), and nothing really (13, 12, 21, 0, 4%) were common concerns.

More reflectively 17% of the As found that changes in themselves should be necessary, and a more positive attitude was mentioned by a further 13% of As and 14% of Es.

Discussion and Conclusions

Students rarely see class size as a problem, they are concerned about what goes on in the classroom. This is probably a reflection of their experience studying in larger classes from the first year of elementary school and in the majority of college classes even for the students who study English intensively. The class size is seen as a given and it is the curriculum and what is achieved that is of concern.

For the study the students express a keen appreciation and interest in what they term real English, and here college is apparently evaluated as more responsive than high school which comes across as not really attending to the perceived needs of the students. This is a common complaint voiced whenever a survey is taken, most elaborately perhaps in the JACET survey of students in the early 1980s (Koike, 1985).

The responses show that there are very wide differences between what individual students note. However as the brief descriptions of the learning environment of the five groups show, that a good understanding of the students' situation will go a long way towards an understanding of what the students wish to study and see as meaningful.

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日本における多人数クラスの英語教育：高等学校，および大学の英語教育にたいする生徒，学生の認識変化を調査する。

トーキル・クリステンセン

要　約

本論は，日本の，高校および大学における英語教育に対する生徒，学生の認識の相違を報告するものである。調査の結果，学生の関心は，クラスの規模ではなく，きわめて一貫してカリキュラムに関するものであることが判明した。かれらは，使える英語技術の習得に注目しているのである。こうした技術が高校で得られるとは思っていない。大学でこそ，自分の望みどうりの英語が習得できると考えているのである。

Appendix

以下の質問は，高校と大学における英語教育の相違について，あなたの感想を尋ねるものです。どうぞ，できるだけ完全に答えて下さい。もし，回答のスペースの足りないときには，用紙の裏を使うか，別の用紙をもらうようにして下さい。

ご協力に感謝いたします。

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2．高校と大学における英語の授業の類似点はどこですか。

3．高校における英語の勉強で，利点と思われるのは何ですか。

4．大学における英語の勉強で，利点と思われるのは何ですか。

5．高校における英語の勉強で，よくないと思われることは何ですか。

6．大学における英語の勉強で，よくないと思われることは何ですか。

7．あなたは，英語の勉強を通じて何をしてみたい（希望）と思いますか。

8．あなたの希望を達成するために，現在の勉学環境をどう変えたらよいと思いますか。